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AUTHOR Owens, Rosemary J.
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ABSTRACT

If dramatic characters are to be rendered "three dimensional" in performance, both the dramatist and the actor/interpreter must create them with proper attention to the physical, sociological, and psychological aspects of character. If oral interpreters understand these dimensions of a particular character, they can analyze such elements as motivation, the manner by which the character expresses himself, his effects on other characters, reactions to him from other characters, and the results of his actions on subsequent events. The student of oral interpretation must begin his analysis of any specific literary passage by understanding the entire selection as objectively as possible in order to realize the relationship of the character and the passage to the whole plot, theme, mood, or style of the work. Sources of information for proper analysis are dialogue, descriptions, and author expositions within the work. (RN)

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the oral interpreter and character analysis

by Rosemary J. Owens

Lajos Egri stated in his book *How to Write a Play* that the reason some playwrights were unsuccessful was their inability to create believable, three dimensional characters. By the three dimensions he meant the physical, sociological, psychological, and the interrelationship of these dimensions. In the physical he included: age, sex, physical make up, health condition, physical appearance, and physical defects. By the sociological dimension he meant society, position within that society, class, family status, cultural pattern, and environment. The psychological was composed of emotions such as hate, love, fear, envy, his pity, and compassion; needs such as love, belongingness, and self esteem; desires, attitudes, and beliefs; qualities such as perception, judgment, imagination, and unselfishness; complexes such as inner tensions or emotional conflicts; influence of associates, and traits. These are some of the factors to be considered under the three dimensions. One may add to the list. Egri believed that the playwright must have the three dimensions if he wished to present believable and well rounded character. The author stressed how each of these aspects influenced the character and determined his behavior.[1]

The relationship between Egri's theory and the interpreter portraying characters is that while the author, poet, or dramatist may create three dimensional characters, the oral interpreter, through lack of analysis, may recreate a one or two dimensional character. Thus the interpreter may fail in his performance as much as the playwrights cited by Egri. We may witness in the party scene in *The Little Foxes* when Birdie drinks too much wine, a comic stereotyped drunk scene instead of the tragic scene it happens to be, in this author's estimation.

Shrodes, Van Gundy and Husbands, speaking within the context of oral interpretation, stressed essentially the same three main forces: the biological, sociological, and psychological. Utilizing examples from literature they revealed how these forces could be found to be operating as determining factors in the behavior of fictional characters. Cognizance was taken of statement that man's inner emotions—the powerful drives of anger, fear, and love, and their complex variations—were constantly operating to affect him and to determine his behavior. The authors also referred to the basic drives, the individual's needs, his desires, and his dreams as affecting the individual.[2]

Maslow added the theory of a positive approach to understanding the character. It was Maslow's contention that not enough attention had been given to the positive factors that affect the individual. Among the aspects the author listed as deserving attention were perception, compassion, pity, and unselfishness. In addition Maslow added the theory of multimotivation.[3]

There are many other theories that will prove beneficial to the interpreter studying character analysis. Among them are the ideas of Charlotte Lee, Thelma Riddle, Richard Hollister, and Don Geiger.

Charlotte Lee, in her discussion of narrative poetry and characterization pointed out that attention must be given to the development of character and the relationship between characters whenever these elements were important in furthering the plot. In developing character the author might tell the reader directly what he needed to know. More frequently a character was revealed by what he said and what he thought and did and by what other characters said and thought about him. In any case, the character was always to be considered in relation to his time, and frequently to the specific location.

A character had two aspects, according to Lee, his inner responses which were his feelings, his interests, and his thoughts; and

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the exterior forces and the exterior manifestations of these responses, which were his activities. He was complete only when the interior forces and the exterior forces were logically related, in terms of his own complexities. Sometimes the psychological characteristics were primary. "Frequently, they are interdependent and the essential conflict of the plot depends upon which is the driving force and determining factor for the other."

As to drama Lee contented that the interpreter, like the actor, was responsible for complete characterization in his preparation. In performance the interpreter presents by the use of suggestion the exterior manifestations based on a complete comprehension of the material.[4]

Thelma Riddle was concerned with the characteristics as evolved by the poet and the dramatist. Riddle's purpose was to show that the poet, through his medium, was as completely a depicter of life, character, and the individuals as the dramatist. The fundamental methods used by the poet were the same, she asserted. One of the methods, or all four, might be used to reveal the characters. According to Riddle the methods were: (1) What a character said about himself; (2) What he did—his actions; (3) What others said about him; (4) The effect he had on other people. Riddle analyzed certain poems and scenes from plays to compare characterization as evolved by the poet and the dramatist and used as a basis for analysis each of the four methods.[5]

Hollister felt that the interpreter should seek a satisfactory and definite answer to the following questions.

> Who is speaking in this piece of literature? To whom is this person speaking? What is his dominant feeling, mood, or point of view? When and how does his spirit or point of view change? Why does he speak?[6]

One of the most interesting methods was presented by Don Geiger. He believed that literature could be analyzed in terms of its dramatic elements. This view was based on understanding literature as a representation of selected experience. By experience, Geiger meant the feelings, responses, and evaluations which were generated by and encompassed various situations. "What we call life," maintained Geiger, "can be seen as a series of situation-attitude relationships. We may trace out these situations and attitudes by discovering the dramatic elements of the experience."

Geiger contended that these situations and attitudes were traceable by discovering the answers to the following questions: "What is performing what action or thought or deed? Where and when is it being performed? How is it being performed? Why is it being performed?" Geiger pointed out that Kenneth Burke used these questions as an approach to understanding some of "the most intricate of human actions."

"Literature, a representation of experience," asserted Geiger, "can be approached the same way." In discovering the answers to these questions the interpreter discovered the situation-attitude relationships which were the piece. "I do not mean," stated Geiger, "that in order to understand a piece we must *always* know the answers to all six questions; rather, we do not need answers to other than these six questions," and added Geiger, "a seventh: how do the answers relate to one another."[7]

My approach in my dissertation, "A Character Analysis from the Standpoint of the Oral Interpreter of the Four Principal Characters in Edwin Arlington Robinson's Poem, Tristram", was a combination of methods, including some theories of my own. I decided to analyze a series of actions of each character and to ascertain certain answers to pertinent questions about the character in committing the action. Thus I hoped to gain insight and an understanding of each character.

One of my first problems was the selection of the actions. Because of the scope of the poem it was not possible to analyze every action of the four principal characters. Therefore, a set of criteria was established to serve as a guide in selecting the actions.

1. Actions that had a significant effect on subsequent events, or on the character, or on the other principal characters.

The second and third criteria were established by the author to aid in selecting actions that revealed the character in different moods and emotions, as he or she reacted to

different experiences and to various people, and thereby represented a fair sampling of the character's behavior under various circumstances.

2. Actions that revealed the character as he or she faced different situations.

3. Actions that revealed the character in his or her relationships with various other characters.

The physiological, sociological, and psychological dimensions were considered as possible motivating forces in the analysis of the actions.

It was decided to analyze one character at a time in the following order: Isolt of Brittany, King Mark, Isolt of Ireland, and Tristram. The organization of the character analysis was as follows:

1. The actions of the character were analyzed one at a time in chronological order. A brief description of the behavior was given before the analysis of that particular action. The question What were the motivating forces that accounted for the action? was stated. The action was then analyzed on the basis of that question.

2. The second division of the character analysis was stated as: What did the analysis of the actions reveal about the following aspects of the character? The four aspects, stated in question form, were then discussed in the following order: Were there any dominant forces that affected the character? What was the emotional nature of the character? What were the dominant characteristics or traits of the character? Did the character change?

There were four possible sources within the context of the poem for data relevant to the analysis: The dialogue of the character involved in the action, the dialogue of the other characters, the thoughts of the characters, and the exposition of the poet. It was recognized that the process of abstracting involved certain precautions. An attempt was made to take into cognizance some of Larrabee's theories on abstraction. Larrabee stated:

> The harm comes, not in abstracting, which is highly necessary and superbly useful for handling great masses of fact and experiences, but in forgetting that we have left out great numbers of individual differences, and that we are not entitled to endow our abstractions at will with mysterious powers and qualities which they cannot be proved to possess.
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> * * * * *
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> The cure for "vicious abstraction" is to be constantly conscious of abstracting while we are doing it.
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> * * * * *
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> Our task is rather to perform more and better abstracting, conscious of itself and in touch with the concrete.
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> * * * * *
>
> Our policy in regard to abstraction, then should not be inflexible, but adapted to our purposes.[4]

In a poem of this scope every reference to the motivating forces could not be cited. However, an attempt was made to investigate all the methods of the poet and to quote directly certain passages that seemed significant and pertinent in revealing the factors that accounted for the character's behavior.

In discussing the motivating forces cognizance was taken of Maslow's theory of multimotivation. It was believed as Maslow pointed out that more than one force may be operating in determining human behavior and action.[5] Therefore, an attempt was made to point out that more than one factor affected the character and accounted for his actions. In addition, the relationship of the forces was indicated whenever such a relationship seemed to exist.

In considering the forces it was decided to use a flexible rather than a set order for the following reasons:

1. All the forces were not necessarily operating in each action.

2. Maslow's theory of multimotivation indicated that a flexible order was more appropriate than a specific order in that the relationship between forces could be more easily indicated.[6]

Any of the methods cited in this paper or a combination of methods may be used by the student of oral interpretation. He may devise a plan of analysis of his own that is very satisfactory. I believe, however, there

are two important requirements that should initiate the study. One is the necessity of reading the entire selection. Two is the obligation for the student to discard his judge's robes and haloe. His goal is an objective understanding of the character not a judgement. By reading the entire work he discovers whether his character changes, the relationship of the character to the plot, theme, mood, and often style of the literature.

His sources of information have been mentioned: the dialogue, the description, and the exposition. In drama he must rely on a more careful study of the dialogue, always being aware of who is speaking. Some playwrights such as Shaw, Williams, Miller, and Barrie provide clues in their stage direction. If there is still some doubt, the playwright's other works and essays sometimes furnish information. Sometimes a discerning critic may clarify a question in the interpreter's mind or merely confirm what the student has discovered. However, I believe that going outside the text should be reserved as a last resort.

Perhaps encouraging the student to do a careful character analysis will result in the following: no more comic drunk Birdies, a Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* who is not just a giddy, vain woman of the streets, a Christine in *The Silver Chord* who is not just a shrewish fishwife who is jealous of her mother-in-law, and a Lennie in of *Mice and Men* who is more than a stereotyped Mortimer Snerd, played only for laughs.

I know that there are many different viewpoints and some opposing in nature in regard to character analysis than have been expressed in this paper. In studying characters as hard as I strive to be objective, I may still be subjective in my final analysis. This is one of the major hazards in studying the complexities of human behavior whether in fact or fiction.

PROFILE OF ROSEMARY J. OWENS

Rosemary J. Owens is presently involved in scholarly research in the area of Speech and instructing on a part-time basis. She received her B.S., with a double major in Speech and English, from the University of Nebraska, and her M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Speech and Drama from the University of Denver.

Professional experience includes the teaching of Speech, English and the direction of plays in Nebraska and Colorado high schools. She taught fundamentals at the University of Alabama; Oral Communications and Public Discussion at Kansas State University; Speech and Drama courses at East Texas State University; and was Assistant Professor of Speech at the University of Texas at Arlington where she taught Fundamentals, Public Speaking, and Oral Interpretation until 1968 when she commenced on her research project.

Dr. Owens' professional affiliations include membership in the Speech Association of America, the American Educational Theatre Association, honorary membership of Alphs Psi Omega, and a member of the IPA of America. She is listed in *Who's Who in American Education*, and *Directory of American Scholars*. She has published a one-act play, *Final Edition*.

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